

Celebrating the Illinois and Michigan Canal

The long-awaited day finally arrived. Almost 12 years earlier, on July 4, 1836, construction had begun on the Illinois and Michigan Canal.

And now on April 16, 1848, the passenger packet *General Fry* would be the first boat to lock through the canal and arrive in Chicago. The hard work of many laborers—mainly Irish—in digging the 97-mile canal by hand had finally come to an end. The new waterway connected Lake Michigan with the Illinois River, almost 100 miles to the west, thereby linking the Great Lakes to the Mississippi River for navigation. It quickly became a vital link in the growing gridwork of water transportation routes across the continent and changed the course of history for the former swampy outpost of Chicago, for much of Illinois, and for a large part of the Midwest.

The editor of the *Gem of the Prairie* (the weekly sister of the *Chicago Tribune*) proclaimed with pride that “. . . the finishing of the Canal was a glorious triumph, and we may justly be proud of it. Proud that we have met successfully all the difficulties incident to its completion, the lukewarmness of friends and the ceaseless hostilities of enemies. A proud day, we say, and we look forward to the future with hope and confidence, that the predictions of its friends will be fully verified.”

The canal's impact on the landscape of Northern Illinois was irreversible. The direction of commerce changed from St. Louis to Chicago, thus opening the way for the latter town to become a great national hub. In the five years after the waterway opened, the population of Chicago grew by 400%. The canal promoted settlement, agriculture, and manufacturing along its corridor. Towns sprang up along its banks, each having a unique identity and contribution to the waterway, collectively dependent on it for commercial and economic growth. By the time the digging had stopped in 1848, no less than six towns had been founded along one 14-mile stretch.

Though passenger traffic soon declined and finally gave way to the speedier railroads, the canal continued to be profitable until the 1880s carrying bulk cargo such as household furnishings, lumber, stone, and grains. But, by the late 19th century, the canal's glory days were behind it. Too

small to accommodate the larger barges then plying the nation's rivers, its decline accelerated until 1933 when the parallel and larger Illinois Waterway opened and the I&M Canal closed for good. Soon thereafter, through the efforts of the Civilian Conservation Corps, it experienced a revival as a linear recreational corridor. This transformation was cut short by the pressing needs of the World War II and the canal sank back into obscurity. A more permanent solution to its future gathered steam in the late 1970s. This momentum culminated in the rebirth of the historic waterway in 1984 as the backbone of a then unique concept—the Illinois and Michigan Canal National Heritage Corridor.



The Illinois and Michigan Canal marked its 150th anniversary in 1998. It presented us with a rare opportunity to spotlight a historic moment and a historic landmark that forever changed north-eastern Illinois. Recognizing the significance of the canal to the state, the region, and the nation, the I&M Canal National Heritage Corridor Commission planned for a year-long sesquicentennial celebration to build enthusiasm and to market the Corridor. Planning for this commemoration opened the way for communities to celebrate the area's shared heritage through commemorative activities, educational programs, exhibits, and recreational endeavors. It also showed how neighboring communities can work together for the benefit of everyone concerned.



Part of the crowd at the April 18, 1998, Illinois and Michigan Canal "birthday party." Photo courtesy Illinois and Michigan Canal National Heritage Corridor.

In 1994, the commission formed a committee including representatives from Corridor Commission partners, both public and private, and from citizen boosters, to plan the commemoration. Everyone hoped that the 49 Corridor communities would produce their own sesquicentennial events. Such celebrations could bring needed capital improvements, tourism dollars, and a renewed interest in the importance of the I&M Canal to the region.

Committee members and interested citizens proposed numerous projects for celebrating the sesquicentennial. They included special events and interpretive programs, teachers' workshops using an existing elementary curriculum on the history and impact of the I&M Canal, school participation in the Chicago Metro and the Illinois History Fairs with prizes funded by the Commission, various ribbon cuttings, and creation of quilts by community quilting groups featuring I&M Canal related themes.

In an attempt to have the year-long commemoration begin as closely as possible to the 150th anniversary of the opening of the I&M Canal, the committee picked Saturday, April 18, for the official birthday party and Chicago's Navy Pier as the site—at the eastern end of the Corridor. The Heritage Corridor Convention & Visitors Bureau, the Commission's marketing arm, primed regional and national media about the upcoming sesquicentennial. Numerous articles on the canal's 150th anniversary and ensuing festivities appeared in Illinois newspapers.

The event was a success. The weather turned out great and the public responded in good numbers. Several communities chartered buses to bring residents to Navy Pier for the event. Many groups arrived with community banners created just for the occasion and there was a generous amount of good-natured cheering whenever their town was

mentioned. Volunteers in period clothing, portraying men and women important in the canal story, circulated among the crowd. Patriotic airs and songs preceded speeches, the unveiling of a special permanent public art project focusing on the canal, and the sealing of items donated by the Corridor communities in a time capsule added to the festive atmosphere. Finally, befitting the spirit of the event and playing on the cooperative nature of the Corridor, one bakery generously donated a birthday cheesecake large enough that everyone attending was able to enjoy a slice. This event set the tone for the year; the celebration had officially begun.

Activities in the year-long commemoration have taken different forms, with many developed by Corridor communities. Our "Sesquicentennial Plan" indicated that each of the 49 communities in the Corridor designate a "community sesquicentennial coordinator." After getting to know one another, these coordinators developed a number of unique special events for the year-long celebration. The I&M Canal was directly responsible for putting many towns on the map in the first place. These 49 communities grew because of the canal, but after the waterway deteriorated and closed, many towns forgot the important role it had played in their history. The enthusiasm generated by the community coordinators allowed many people, from politicians to ordinary citizens, to reflect on the canal—in some cases now just a dry ditch—and to realize it's regional and national significance. With this greater awareness, the communities came together to develop and produce the numerous activities scheduled for 1998-99.

The sesquicentennial commemoration will officially end in April 1999, at Starved Rock State Park—at the western end of the Corridor. It will focus on the accomplishments of the sesquicentennial year and will urge individuals and organizations to continue working together.

The Illinois and Michigan Canal has made a strong comeback in the past few years; heavy use of the trail along its length attests to that. But the best part of this comeback may be psychological. In a region that has pitted communities against each other, the resurgence of the canal has brought people together from Chicago to LaSalle-Peru. Cooperation, in regard to the I&M Canal, is its own reward. And that is an achievement comparable with the old canal's original impact.

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A complete list of activities can be viewed on the Corridor's web page <<http://www/nps.gov/ilmi>>.